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**The Usage and Symbolic Meaning of a Length of White Cotton Cloth  
Used in Shamanist Rituals for the Dead in Korea**

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Good afternoon. I am Jeeun Kim. I am a working artist and I teach fiber-art classes at universities in Seoul, Korea. My interest in this topic began with a textile history class I took at UH. The class was taught by Pat Hickman, my mentor, and covered the history of world textiles and the social roles and transformation of traditional textiles. This class stimulated my curiosity about the textiles of my own culture. The class taught me to look not only at the appearance of textiles and how they are made but also to look at the social roles of textiles in Korean culture.

As a practicing artist who uses fiber as a medium, I have been paying special attention to the function and symbolism of fiber in traditional customs and culture as well as in traditional craft.



*Figure 1a (left) and figure 1b (right).*

In this talk, I will focus on the symbolic role of the length of white cloth used in the ritual for the dead called *Kut* in Korea (Fig. 1a – Fig. 2b). I have chosen six different types of *Kut*, which vary depending on the region or the circumstance of the deceased person. The lengths of white cloth used in these rites carry different meanings and are called by different names, but mostly they represent a road to connect this world and the next world or a bridge to connect to a person and a god. Despite some differences, the purpose is the same in all six *Kut*: to wish the dead a peaceful exit from this world.



*Figure 2a (left) and figure 2b (right). Photographs by Kim Soonam.*



**Figures 4a and 4b.**



**Figure 5a.**



**Figure 5b.**

This act of using the length of white cloth in Kut is usually performed in the last part of the ceremony. This act (Figs. 4a and 4b) also has been adopted in various contemporary political demonstrations as a finale of the social gatherings. The interpretation and revival of this long tradition in political gatherings demonstrates that the symbolic meaning of the length of white cloth is well understood and carried on among Korean people. Lastly, I will introduce four Korean artists whose work I can relate to the notion of this ritual (Figs. 5a and 5b, from [neolook.com](http://neolook.com)).



**Figure 6 (left) and figure 7 (right).** January 29, 2007, at Ssamzi in Insa-dong, Seoul, Korea.

The first Kut I'd like to introduce happened On January 29, 2007, a Kut was held at the *Ssamzi* space in Insa-dong, a gallery district in Seoul, on the anniversary of the death of Nam June Paik (Figs. 6 and 7). This Kut was requested by the owner of the Ssamzi, Mr. Chun Hogyun, and the curator, Kim, Honghee, to pray for the repose of Paik's soul. When Nam June Paik was alive, he performed Kut by himself for the memory of Joseph Beuys in 1990 in the backyard of Gallery Hyundai in Seoul and in New York's Central Park for Charlotte Moorman (Figs. 8a and 8b).



**Figure 8a (left).** Ssamzi in Insa-dong, Seoul, Korea.

**Figure 8b (right).** Lee Jiyoung-installation of "Farewell Nam Jun Paik."

Nam June Paik conceptualized his art as a pursuit of global cultural exchange with a participating audience and mass communication through the deep observation of cultural function and meaning which shares an essential part of Kut.





*Figure 9 – Figure 18.*

In figures 9 – 18, a national *mansin* (shaman), Kim Kumhwa, is performing a Kut for Paik. In this Kut, the mansin is listing his achievements as a world-renowned artist. The Mansin in a form of recitation (chanting) and singing also mentions his aloneness despite his fame. The mansin, wearing a man's coat, pretends she becomes Nam June Paik. At the conclusion of this Kut, the length of white cloth is brought out to the middle of the ritual ground, where helpers hold both ends. The mansin sings verses, and the helpers sing refrains: may his soul rest in peace. The mansin urges people to write blessings on the cloth and put money on it to pay the travel expenses of the deceased on his trip to the next world. In the last sequence, the mansin literally cuts the cloth in half with her body by walking through it, as though she becomes the dead and leaves this world for good.



*Figure 19.*

*Figure 20.*

*Figure 21.*

*Figure 22.*

*Figure 23.*



Figure 24.



Figure 25.



Figure 26.



Figure 27.

The next Kut was for the photographer Kim Su-nam at his one-year memorial exhibition at the Gana Art Gallery in Seoul (Fig. 19 – Fig. 27). He had specifically photographed Kut and mansin since the 1970s, when the government banned Kut as superstition. The Kut was performed by three mansin whose portraits were among his photographs hung on the gallery wall. The characteristics of this ritual of requiem, or *Chinogi-Kut*, are the rite for the ten kings in the other world, the rite for Princess *Pari*, and the rite of division of the cloth bridge. This rite begins with cleaning the bridge with dancing and singing. Shaman asks family members to donate travel money for a deceased person. According to this rite, there are ten kings who control different worlds or gates in the other world. The deceased spirit must pass these ten gates through the cloth bridge and reach Nirvana. The passing of the deceased to the other world is dramatized clearly by the cutting of the cloth bridges.



Figure 28.



Figure 29.



Figure 30.



Figure 31.

Division of the cloth bridges is performed to send the deceased to paradise. In Seoul Chinogi-Kut, family members first pull two long cloth bridges, one made of hemp and the other of cotton (Fig. 28 – Fig. 31). After turning left and right twice, the shaman proceeds through the cloth bridges with her breast, splitting each of the cloth bridges in half. The hemp symbolizes the unclean bridge that opens the way to the ten kings of hell. The cotton is for the clean bridge that opens the way to Buddha or Nirvana. In this Kut, they did not cut the hemp cloth. I assume that hemp cloth these days is quite expensive, and so they omitted the cloth-cutting process.



Figure 32.



Figure 33a.

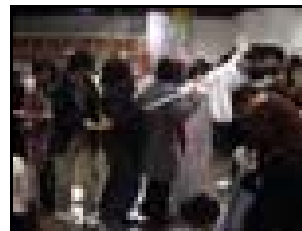


Figure 33b.

Divided in half, the cloth becomes a rope that connects crowds in line (Fig. 32 – Fig. 33b). They dance together going round and round. This cloth unifies people to celebrate the completion of the ritual that has succeeded in helping the deceased one completely depart this world. There will be no harm as a result of hatred of the dead toward the people left behind.





Figure 34.



Figure 35.



Figure 36.



Figure 37.

The third ritual I'd like to introduce is *Kop'uri*, literally, "untying the knots" (Fig. 34). The difficulties and bruises in life experienced by the deceased are symbolically presented in knots looped through a long white cloth (Fig. 35). The mansin first sings the kop'uri text, describing various knots, and ends with a coda-like phrase, which in turn becomes the refrain of the second piece of the kop'uri, "may this be untied easily." Many short verses or dance movements alternate with this refrain. While dancing with strong pulling actions of her arms and putting her weight on each foot alternately, she unties all the knots in the cloth, hung from the top of a pole (Fig. 36). With strong arm movements, she creates in the air, between her hand and the top of the pole, long, smooth curves of white cotton (Fig. 37). The mansin unties the knots to release pain and grievance felt by the deceased in order to free the soul and let it enter the other world in peace.



Figure 38.



Figure 39.



Figure 40.



Figure 41.



Figure 42.



Figure 43.



Figure 44.

The white long cloth in *Hon gonjigi Kut* is used as a route for drawing the soul up from the water (Fig. 38). The ritual for the souls of those who died away from home requires ushering in the soul. While the souls of the drowned need an extensive ritual to draw them up from the water. This Kut is carried out by the sea or river at the point nearest to where the death occurred. A bamboo tree of ten feet or more is freshly cut, its upper leaves untouched. This bamboo tree becomes a *honda* (soul-bamboo), and to it various ritual objects are attached, including a long paper ribbon with a reference to the drowned person's name and location (Fig. 39). One end of a long length of cotton is also tied to the honda (Fig. 40). At the other end a bowl is wrapped, half filled with grains of rice, over which is placed money and an item of identification that has the name and birthday of the drowned person on it (Fig. 41). As an obligatory sacrifice, a pig or chicken is chosen (Fig. 42). The celebrant erects the honda and sinks the bowl into the water, which, connected to the honda by a long length of cotton cloth, creates a slight tension. This provides a route for the soul to come up from water to dry land. The mansin calls the name of the dead three times and requests the water gods to release his or her soul. She then asks them to accept the sacrifice as a substitute and throws the live pig or chicken into the water. All eyes are concentrated on the bamboo leaves. When the soul comes up, the leaves start trembling and is transmitted to the tree and the holder. When this occurs, it creates great excitement. On being possessed, he or she usually behaves as the drowned person. Now, indeed, the soul has returned home safely and is ready to receive the next service (Fig. 43 and Fig.44).



Figure 45.



Figure 46.

Besides these sequences of Kut, a length of white cloth is used in a ritual of presence of the Supreme Being and a ritual of a traditional funeral bier service. In a ritual of conferment of the Supreme Being to become a shaman, a three-meter-long white cotton cloth called *sansindari* becomes a route to contact the mountain god and receive preternatural power (Fig. 45). One end of the cloth is attached to an altar, and the prospective shaman holds the other end to receive the mountain god. To receive a god of the highest mountain in the village, a shaman candidate holds a length of hemp cloth called *surachun* using both hands with respect to receive the energy of water in a jar. While wetting the cloth, the more water bubbles that appear the better the shaman become (Fig. 46).



Figure 47.



Figure 48.



Figure 49.



Figure 50.

A length of white cloth called *ilwoldari*, literally meaning bridge of sun and moon, is laid from inside of a house, where senior mansin--asking questions to test a candidate--are sitting in the yard and the shaman candidate is waiting to answer the questions (Fig. 47 - Fig. 49).

A long length of white cloth attached to a funeral bier represents a road or bridge in the same manner as in the last sequence of the Kut for the dead. This tradition began after the 1970s in Cholla province though. Traditionally no long length of cloth was used. Hence, this is a new tradition (Fig. 50).



Figure 51.



Figure 52.



Figure 53.



Figure 54.



Figure 55.

Like this recent practice of borrowing a length of white cloth for the funeral ceremony, this cloth often appears in present-day political demonstrations in Korea. Professor of physical education at The Seoul National University Lee Haeju performed “*Ssikim Kut*” (Fig. 51 – Fig. 55) in the public square of Seoul city hall for the memorial of the June Struggle (1987). She has danced to appease dead spirits. Her dance implies hope in every historical field of Korean society. She performed “*Sungpuri*” (calming a vigorous anger), which was a new version of the traditional

emancipator dance “*Salpuri*” in front of two million people who poured into the streets in order to attend the funeral of the patriot Lee Hanyeol, who resisted despotism on the July 9, 1987. Lee Hanyeol was a student of Yeonse University who died from a teargas shell in demonstrations against military despotism. Here Professor Lee dances again to memorialize the June struggle and concludes with “*Begarugi*,” which means cutting through the length of cloth. We’ll look at a video of her performance.



Figure 56.



Figure 57.



Figure 58.

A ritual was held for Heo Seuk (Fig. 56 and Fig 57), who set himself on fire to protest the Free Trade Agreement with the United States on April 1, 2007. The crowd of laborers marched to praise his self-sacrifice and the gathering concluded (Fig. 58) with a “*Begarugi*” performance.



Figure 59.

When a U.S. armored vehicle weighing more than 50 tons crushed two middle-school girls on a street near the U.S. Army base in Paju, Korea, angry citizen all over Korea erupted in protest of the failure to punish the U.S. soldiers involved. A crowd gathered for a candlelight demonstration and the “*Begarugi*” was performed as an expression of condolence for two girls’ early deaths and for their peaceful passage to the other world (Fig. 59).



Figure 60



Figure 61a



Figure 61b.



Figure 62.

Exceptionally, five “*Begarugi*” were performed at the Meiji Park in Tokyo, Japan (Fig. 60 – Fig. 62). The Kut was performed by mansin So Kyounguk to commemorate more than four million spirits who were unable to make it home after being forced to participate in World War Two. Those spirits were considered soldiers who died fighting on behalf of the emperor of Japan and were buried at Yasukuni Shrine. Five cloths were used instead of one because there were too many people to send away.





*Figure 63.*



*Figure 64.*

Kut, specifically a ritual for the dead, helps the spirit of the deceased person proceed to the other world. The highlight of a Kut could be the dramatization of the dead person's passing by a shaman's cutting action through the cloth bridge. This ritual has been artistically dramatized as a manifestation of a community's political assertion (Fig. 63 and Fig 64).

Kut rituals reflect the "Korean love of communal play" which embraces both contact with the deceased spirit and participation by the crowd, with each element becoming almost equal through the power of playful laughter and symbolic performance.

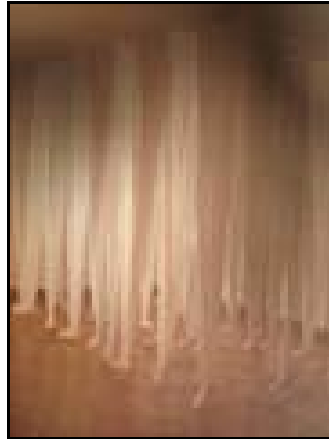


*Figure 65.*

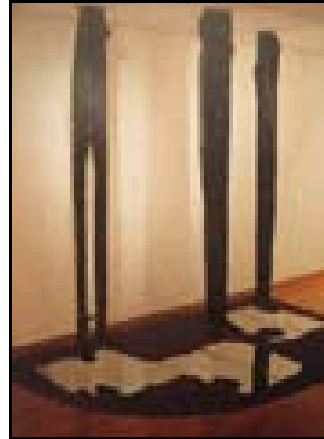


*Figure 66.*

I have found a few Korean artists who share their artistic activity with this ritual. This is Kimsooja's work installed in the courtyard of Honolulu Hale--Honolulu's city hall--in 2003 as a major installation of the Korea/Hawai'i Crossings Exhibition to commemorate the centennial of Korean immigration to the United States (Fig. 65 and Fig. 66). She maximized the space in terms of its scale and structure. A cylindrical length of white cloth was hanging from the skylight. A mirror platform was in the middle of the cylinder, and visitors could go inside and see the reflection of the sky below their feet. The length of cloth used in Kut and Kimsooja's body of work are not generally thought of together, but they seem to have close theatrical, imaginative and existential ties in spite of their distance in place and artistic environs.

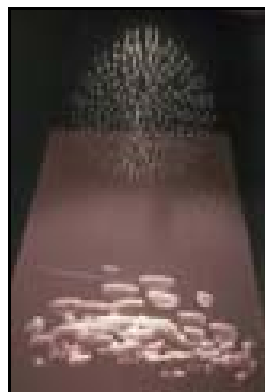


*Figure 66.*

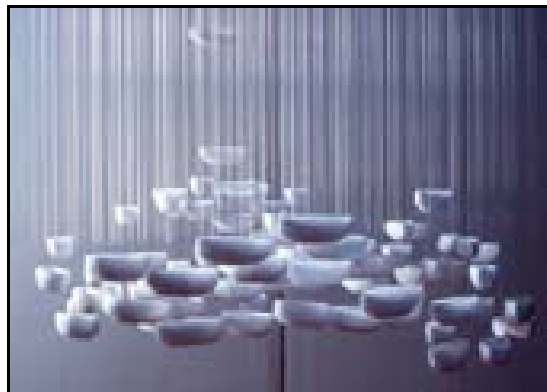


*Figure 67.*

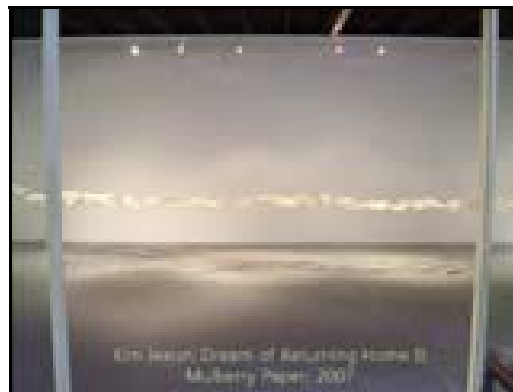
This work by Chang Namyoung is titled “Life” (Fig. 66 and Fig. 67). Chang hung a lengthy cotton cloth with a cast human foot attached at the end. He saw life and death as having the same value. Death should be celebrated as the joy of starting a new life.



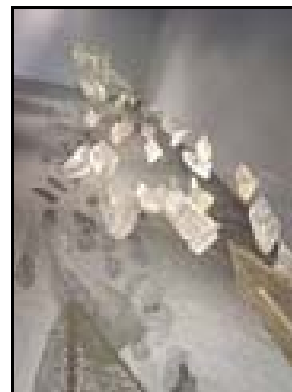
*Figure 68.*



*Figure 69.*



*Figure 70.*



*Figure 71.*

This is my work (Figs. 68-71). It was done for the show celebrating the centennial of Korean immigration to Hawaii in 2003. One hundred boats were carved from salt bricks (Fig. 68 and Fig. 69). The boats represent the unachieved dreams of the immigrants and also function as virtual vehicles that carry on their hopes and connect their spirits from generation to generation. Figures 70 and 71 are paper boats, having many holes they create a form parallel to that of the long cloth used in Kut.



*Figure 72.*



*Figure 73.*



*Figure 74.*



*Figure 75.*



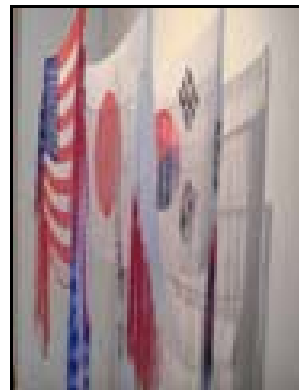
*Figure 76a.*



*Figure 76b.*



*Figure 77a.*



*Figure 77b.*

The last artist I'd like to introduce is Yuon Kibaik, who graduated from Seoul National University majoring in sculpture. By deconstructing symbolic objects, he tried to reveal the true nature of what it is. I make a connection between his work and the Kut ritual. In order to reveal a new life in the object, he chose deconstruction. This implies that assuring a death leads to achieving a new life. This notion is the same as calling a dead spirit and sending it to the other world through the cloth bridge in the Kut ritual (Figs. 72 - 77).

This paradox that exists in the ritual of cutting cloth has been a primary inspiration for contemporary artists as well as for ordinary people who explore their conscious minds within social circumstances.